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ABSTRACT

A small study to investigate cultural instruction in Finnish schools is reported. Twelve randomly selected teachers of English were interviewed concerning their attitudes about the importance of cultural studies, how they implement cultural studies, and problems in presenting cultural instruction in the classroom. The interviews suggest that the majority of the teachers have good intentions concerning cultural instruction and are willing to include it in their teaching, but that their training to do so had been minimal. It is concluded that while some cultural items are provided in the English lessons, cultural competence as an underlying basis for all language teaching does not seem to be acknowledged in Finnish schools. (LB)

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TEACHING CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM IN FINNISH SCHOOLS

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Introduction

Foreign language teaching has traditionally centered primarily on teaching the "actual" language skills: grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. However, as a language and the culture where the language is spoken are deeply embedded in each other, increasing emphasis has been attached to teaching sociocultural competence - referring to rules and norms of appropriate verbal and nonverbal behaviour in the target culture - alongside grammatical competence in the foreign language classroom. Since languages bear many cultural connotations, which can be best seen in idioms, metaphors, and speech act rules, mastery of the language necessarily implies knowledge of the culture. Successful communication across cultures cannot take place unless the interactants understand at least some of the underlying values that affect the communication situation. The diversity of the people(s) who use English as a medium for expressing their ideas has many implications for teaching cultural competence in the English language classroom: information should be provided both about target culture phenomena ('target culture' refers here mainly to British and North American cultures), and about other cultures, to enable the learners to understand and to become more tolerant toward different kinds of behavioural patterns.

Information about "elitist" culture, referring to arts, history, geography, etc., is needed so as to get the students to understand the target society better, but it must be emphasized that teaching cultural competence should not consist of teaching merely facts about target (or other) cultures but that developing the affective component - aiming at tolerance and positive curiosity toward other people - is more fruitful and further-reaching than learning a list of individual phenomena. Teaching cross-cultural competence does not mean that learners should learn how to cope in all culturally bound situations like natives; instead,

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awareness of differences in communication styles in different cultures should be increased in the realization that each culture has its own values and norms that influence the everyday life.

The present study

Subjects and method

The syllabus for foreign language teaching in Finnish schools also emphasizes the importance of cultural studies as a part of successful foreign language learning. However, it does not state anything specific about how cultural instruction should proceed. The aim of this small-scale study was to investigate the situation surrounding cultural instruction in Finnish schools.

Twelve teachers of English were interviewed on their notions of the importance of cultural studies, how they go about it in practice, and what problems there are in executing cultural instruction in the classroom. The teachers, who work in lower and upper levels of a comprehensive school and in a upper secondary school in the Jyväskylä area, were randomly selected for the interview. They represent different age groups and have various teaching experiences. The method used was theme interview (see Hirsjärvi & Hurme 1982).

Results

The interviews revealed that the majority of the teachers obviously have good intentions concerning cultural instruction and are willing to include it in their teaching. In order to understand their readiness to carry out cultural instruction we examined whether, during their teacher training, the teachers had been provided with information concerning this matter, and found out that almost without exception this had been minimal. Despite the poor training in this respect, as teachers of English are naturally interested in the Anglo-American cultures, they are positively oriented toward introducing culture in the classroom. Also, according to the interviewed teachers, the students' attitudes toward cultural instruction in general are very positive. The pupils seem to be interested and motivated, as well as willing to learn more about both target and

other foreign cultures. However, carrying out cultural instruction is not that straightforward.

First of all, already the concept of culture itself bears different connotations to different teachers, which naturally has an impact on the contents of their teaching. For instance, some of the teachers seem to underestimate the importance of everyday culture and consider it somewhat inferior to elitist culture. Consequently, they leave the former and culturally-based communication strategies aside and pay attention to literature or other similar "high culture" phenomena only. Moreover, teachers often base their notion of culture on the textbook they use without further thoughts: what the textbook considers as culture is also the notion of the teacher. For example, one of the upper secondary school teachers is so dependent on the textbook concepts that she stated: "Well, I don't know if sports is culture, look at *Wings* and see if it's there." Naturally the teachers' own interests in some particular fields of culture play a considerable role in deciding what to emphasize. There also seems to be a tendency - probably due to pupils' different ages - for the lower level teachers to concentrate on everyday life more while the cultural instruction in the upper levels deals more with more advanced (= "higher") features.

Although cognitive information is quite often provided in the English lessons, the affective side of cultural instruction seems to be rather neglected. Some "funny" differences are sometimes brought up (the English children's knee socks in winter, the poor heating system in England, the excessive use of the car by North Americans, etc.), but the teaching does not go deeper into the reasons for these behaviours, nor in the target culture values and norms in general. It is unfortunate that all too often one-sided views are provided which strengthen the stereotypes the students may have.

The teachers tell their students very little about different modes of behaviour in international encounters, such as different notions of proximity, appropriate topics for discussion, or speech-act rules that are regarded proper in different countries. Neither are possible difficulties that might arise between people with different cultural backgrounds discussed in the lessons. As one of the main points in this study was to find out whether the teachers of English make their pupils understand that while people speak English in various situations, the different rules and modes of conversation in different countries can cause

misunderstandings and thus failure to communicate one's meaning effectively, the results are not too promising. The teachers obviously do not consider the matter so important that they would spend some time in teaching cross-cultural competence. It is highly probable that many English teachers never think about the matter in more detail: as this aspect of language teaching has not traditionally been emphasized, the importance of being aware of different conversational rules is not even now totally acknowledged.

The question of how cultural instruction is transmitted in actual teaching situations does not come without problems either: the interviewees seem to rely on the idea that culture is mainly presented indirectly through texts and pictures, and that special "cultural inputs" are considered only as short breaks between more "serious" work - meaning study of grammar and vocabulary. They believe that culture is taught implicitly during language lessons. Fairly little integration with other subjects takes place although it is one of the main aims in the current curricular tendencies.

As to the material for cultural instruction provided in the textbooks, the teachers seem to be rather content. Also additional authentic material which some of the teachers have collected during trips and through contacts abroad is used in appropriate situations. However, all teachers agree on the shortage of time resources.

In general it is mainly the teachers themselves who decide when and what is introduced about culture, and moreover, they almost without exception do it completely themselves, ie., the students are hardly ever given the chance to actively participate in preparing and presenting cultural material for the classroom. Interestingly enough, groupwork, which would seem to be a suitable method for cultural studies, is rarely taken advantage of. Penfriends, clubs, TV, concerts and other extra-curricular material are only occasionally used and very strongly based on individual teachers' activity and contacts.

Conclusion

An analysis of the opinions of only 12 teachers does not give any right to make generalizations concerning the teaching of cultural competence in the Finnish

educational system. This small-scale study reveals that while some cultural items, which are often rather elitist or unrelated in the nature, are provided in the English lessons, cultural competence as an underlying basis for all language teaching does not, unfortunately, seem to be sufficiently acknowledged in Finnish schools. If cultural competence is to be taught in language lessons, teachers need to be better prepared for this task: it is essential to improve teacher training and study materials; and furthermore, it must be acknowledged that cultural studies are as demanding and important as grammar and vocabulary studies.

REFERENCE

Heilala-Rasimov, Taru-Maija and Jarna Vesanen 1989. Foreign languages and cultural studies: teaching cultural competence in the English language classroom in Finnish schools. M.A. thesis. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä, Department of English.